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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ALGIERS 001572

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TAGS: PREL PTER PHUM KDEM AG

SUBJECT: FORMER FIS LEADERS QUESTION IMPLEMENTATION OF NATIONAL RECONCILIATION

REF: ALGIERS 751

Classified By: DCM Thomas F. Daughton for reason 1.4 (b, d).

¶1. (U) Former Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) leaders Rabeh Kebir and Anwar Haddam and former Islamic Salvation Army (AIS) emir Madani Mezrag gave interviews that appeared August 27 in the Arabic-language daily El Chourouk El Youmi. The interview of Haddam, who currently resides in the U.S., was taken from an August 23 interview with Dubai-based al-Arabiya Television. In their comments, all three men voiced general support for President Bouteflika and the Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation adopted in September 2005. However, each had his own reasons for criticizing the government's implementation of the law.

¶2. (U) Kebir claimed that he fully complied with all administrative procedures in submitting his application to return to Algeria to benefit from an amnesty under the Charter. He characterized the handling of his application and those of other former FIS leaders living abroad as "very slow," however, complaining that the Algerian authorities had placed administrative obstacles in their way. He also said the GOA had generally failed to implement the charter in some (unspecified) areas. Kebir nonetheless reiterated his support for Bouteflika's national reconciliation process.

¶3. (U) Haddam urged Bouteflika to break his silence and tell the Algerian public that the steps outlined for national reconciliation in the current Charter were merely a first step that would be followed by other steps. Haddam suggested that future steps should include provisions for healing psychological wounds, revealing the truth about past crimes, and engaging in a collective search for a permanent solution to the Algerian crisis. Haddam added that "Algeria needs more time to spread the culture of reconciliation and pluralism."

¶4. (U) Mezrag vehemently criticized the Algerian bureaucracy and accused it of intentionally impeding implementation of the Charter. Referring to the "France Party" -- the francophone elites who are decidedly more secular and Western in outlook than the vast majority of the Algerian population -- Mezrag laid the blame on these elements of the GOA for hindering the resolution under provisions of the Charter for granting legal status to repentant terrorists and delaying the payment of compensation to the families of victims of terrorism. He added that the "eradicators want to push the country into a new war." Mezrag also criticized the authorities for their corruption and ingratitude: "Despite all concessions we (the Islamists) have made for sake of God and country, the corrupt government under the pressure of

certain lobbies (i.e., the "France Party") remains ungrateful."

We Don't Want Him

¶5. (C) National Liberation Front (FLN) Communications Director Said Bouhadja told us August 29 that Mezrag had previously declared in the press his intent to seek an elected position within the FLN party. Of course, said Bouhadja, the FLN would never allow Mezrag to stand as a candidate in or on behalf of the party. Furthermore, the FLN had held no discussion with him about doing so. PolEc Chief asked Bouhadja and another member of the FLN steering committee if the August 27 interviews amounted to "political activity," which is forbidden to amnesty recipients under the Charter. They said it was their understanding that press interviews given by former FIS leaders, so long as they did not advocate violence or Islam as the basis for political activity, were permitted. That said, both thought the GOA would modify this and other definitional aspects of political activity based on "time and experience." It was clear neither that the GOA, the Algerian people, nor Algerian political parties would tolerate a return to violence or advocacy of it, they added. In their view, running for office was not possible for Mezrag, and his press interviews needed to remain "moderate" if he was to avoid running afoul of the Charter. (Note: Mezrag later announced to the press that he intended to run for elected office in 2007 -- without specifying a party of choice -- and called on the GOA to permit all former FIS figures to run for office. Prime Minister Belkhadem, responding via the press, reiterated that former FIS figures were ineligible to do so.)

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¶6. (C) COMMENT: In their interviews, these leading Islamist figures of the 1990s were careful to avoid criticism of President Bouteflika, apparently believing that it makes no sense to bite the hand that has fed them -- or, in this case, allowed them to re integrate into society. It is also striking that Mezrag, who lives in Algeria, has been free to give interviews to the press on political matters. (We confirmed with the editor of El Chorouk El Youmi that the GOA had not complained to the paper about the publication of the August 27 articles.) Given the restrictions of the Charter and the cautionary conversations that government officials have had with Mezrag and others, his increasing press appearances underscore the intent of some Islamists to push the envelope and challenge the GOA on the limits of their political activity. The comments of FLN officials reflect the continuing uncertainty in the ranks of the government about how to handle this kind of behavior.

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